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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 002072

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SUBJECT: SEIF SAYS SARG ONLY FEIGNING CONFIDENCE, FACING
SIGNIFICANT HURDLES

REF: A) DAMASCUS 2064 B) DAMASCUS 1433

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)
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11. (C) SUMMARY: In a meeting with Charge d'Affaires and PolChief on May 4, key opposition figure Riad Seif noted a recent decrease in SARG security scrutiny. However, he remains subject to a travel ban and will not participate in the upcoming Syrian-American Congress in person or via a live hookup. Seif described his recent visit to Kamal Labwani in Aadra prison, calling Labwani "strong, determined, and optimistic." Seif also commented on the SARG's current situation, noting that the regime is feigning confidence and is cracking down on civil society due to nervousness about external events, particularly the upcoming UNIIIC report. Furthermore, Seif added that in his view, the current economic situation in Syria is unsustainable over the longer term. Meanwhile, Seif is encouraging the Damascus Declaration group to establish an external committee that could act without threat of SARG retribution and would be authorized to make statements for the entire Declaration movement. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) SECURITY PRESSURE DECREASED, BUT STILL NO PASSPORT: Key opposition figure Riad Seif met with Charge d'Affaires and PolChief in his office on May 4. Seif noted that overt security pressure on him has decreased recently. While a security agent remains stationed outside his office door, requesting information about visitors, Seif is no longer followed by security service cars. He has also not been called in for meetings with security service officials for the last two months. Seif suspects, however, that security service scrutiny is being continued covertly. Seif added that he was recently informed that he is not allowed to travel and was refused a new passport when he applied. Thus he will not be able to participate in the May 20 Syrian-American Congress in Chicago. Seif expressed disappointment at not being able to publicly take on SARG figures like Butheina Sha'aban or Imad Mustafa. He would not fear being arrested upon return to Syria due to the very public nature of the appearance with two SARG officials. Nor does he plan to participate in the conference by video or phone, since it would not have the same effect as he would not be able to express his opinions fully and may face more repercussions for making critical statements within Syria.

13. (C) SEIF RETURNS TO AADRA PRISON TO VISIT LABWANI: Seif described his recent visit to Aadra Prison, where he was imprisoned for nearly five years, to visit jailed activist Kamal Labwani. Seif joked that returning to Aadra was "like going home" and that he received a big welcome from the guards. Seif was surprised at the ease of which he was allowed to enter the prison, noting that no one bothered to

check his visitation permit until well into his conversation with Labwani. Seif said that the SARG is being "harsh and cruel to people" and cited Labwani's experiences in prison, where prisoners allied with the SARG harass and steal from him. Seif described Labwani as still being very strong, determined, and optimistic.

¶4. (C) SARG ONLY FEIGNING CONFIDENCE: According to Seif, the SARG is attempting to look confident in the public arena but is in fact very nervous about external events, particularly the June 15 UNIIIC report. The SARG cannot control external events, and is thus asserting its internal control by cracking down on civil society. The SARG particularly fears the mobilization of the masses, which could create an environment similar to the March 14 events in Lebanon, and has thus emphasized to him and others its red line banning public demonstrations. At the same time, however, Seif noted that while the opposition (and particularly himself) enjoys indirect, moral support from society at large, the Syrian public is not willing at this stage to take to the street in support of change.

¶5. (C) ECONOMIC CRISIS LOOMS: Seif was also very pessimistic about Syria's economic future. While acknowledging that growth is occurring in some sectors, Seif noted that the SARG is using its foreign exchange reserves to maintain stability and prop up the currency. Seif predicted that the SARG will face major budgetary problems in one year, based on decreasing oil revenues, lower tax revenues, and increasing poverty and unemployment levels. Commodity prices are also heavily subsidized, but the SARG fears raising prices (and decreasing subsidies), particularly for diesel. Seif noted that he had heard that Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Abdullah Dardari is making pessimistic statements

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privately about the country's economic situation, expressing concerns to friends about the country's fiscal situation and particularly the need to raise diesel prices by 300%.

¶6. (C) COMMENTS ON DAMASCUS DECLARATION: Seif is focused on re-energizing the Damascus Declaration group. He noted that he had signed the separate, recently drafted Damascus-Beirut Declaration (ref A) and will forward a copy to the embassy. He is also encouraging his fellow Damascus Declaration (DD) signatories to allow the creation of an external DD committee that would be able to act and speak out freely without the constant threat of SARG retribution faced by the internal DD members. The external committee could "breathe more freely and cannot be blocked," while still communicating and discussing with the internal members. Seif emphasized the importance of the external group having the authority to speak on behalf of the entire international Damascus Declaration movement. Seif suggested Paris-based professor Burhan Ghalioun in this context.

¶7. (C) NEW BOOK PROJECT EXPLORES PRE-ASAD SYRIA: Seif also is counting down the three weeks left before the end of the two-month press ban imposed by the SARG (ref B). (COMMENT: Seif did not speculate about how he will respond if the SARG security services insist, as we think likely, that he continue to muzzle himself and not give interviews.) Seif is also working on a book project exploring the state of pre-Asad Syria. Noting that Syria was considered an economic tiger before the Ba'thist seizure of power, Seif seeks to present in his book a Syrian tradition of democracy, freedom, and lack of corruption and how issues like rule of law, education, and Islamism were handled successfully by leaders of that day. Combining documents and new interviews with figures from that period, Seif seeks to juxtapose the leadership of that era with the current regime and encourage Syrians to "regain self-confidence that democracy and freedom are possible." Seif's goal is to reach the ordinary people who have been "brainwashed" and to make democracy more understandable to society at large. Such an effort is necessary not only to educate Syrians about their democratic

past, but also to counteract the SARG's relatively effective campaign of equating democracy with the current political problems of Iraq and Lebanon.

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